

Bytes & Pieces

Newsletter of the Hobart Computer Users Group Inc.

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European Union threatens Microsoft with further fines

While Microsoft has had some success in the US settling anti-trust violation suits, it is finding the going much more difficult in the European Court of Justice (EJC). The Court operates on the old Roman premise that the accused is guilty until proven innocent. The Court also demands that fines imposed be paid before appeals are heard.

So far the EJC has ordered Microsoft to pay a huge fine (\$USD613 million), to provide documentation for its competitors to achieve interoperability with Microsoft's products, and to provide a version of Windows without a Windows Media Player included. Recently the Court gave Microsoft until 25 January 2006 to comply with that ruling. If it fails to satisfy the Court that it has complied, Microsoft faces fines of \$USD2.37 million dollars a day, back-dated to 15 December this year.

Microsoft legal chief Brad Smith was left wondering what more the company has to do. "We've shipped a new version of Windows, we've paid a historic fine, and we've provided unprecedented access to Microsoft technology to promote interoperability with other industry players. In total, we have now responded to more than 100 requests from the Commission" (BBC News, 22 December 2005). Although "the firm [has] done its utmost to comply with the EU's demands, ... Brussels [keeps] changing the goalposts," Mr Smith added.

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Original Cards

Recently I received an email that someone had sent me an Original Card. To see the card, Original Cards insisted that I load their e-card player. The player would not load into Firefox under Linux so I started Windows ME under Win4Lin. The player caused that to crash. I then examined the message closely and found tell-tale signs that it was a spam message containing hidden, unrelated words to help it get through spam-blocking software.

I thought, "If that is how they choose to promote their business, I feel justified in alerting members that cards from Original Cards should be treated with great caution." However, I felt I should do a Google and see if I

could find out more. After all, as my nephew Brett says, “Google knows everything!”

That search led me to the real Original Cards site which carried this explanation:

The virus builders made a copy of our site on ... two fake domains. By using a massmail worm people are invited with a copy of our e-mail layout, that they have a card. When people click on the link inside they will be directed to one of the fake sites and will have a worm installed through a flash plugin. This is a sick and very dirty action, we have no clue for whatever reasons we are attacked. Maybe it is jealousy or just destroying whatever comes in their way. But anyway it works well and we will end up in blacklists and so on. I could scream and kill the bastards with my bare hands.

So don't blame Original Cards and don't block them using an external blacklist. They have been providing a free e-card service for around ten years and were not involved in the creation of the damaging worms. However, for the next few weeks don't be surprised if your “Original Card” leads nowhere. The websites used to distribute the worms have already been closed.

Footnote: To repair Windows ME, I simply did a System Restore. System Restore is available in ME and XP, but not 98 and 98SE. With them, you should invest in Go Back or similar software.

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Phishing goes on

Today I received an email purporting to come from service@paypal.com stating that my “latest payment could not be processed”. “Strange,” I thought, “I haven't used PayPal for years.”

In the interests of research and for your edification, I clicked on the link in the email.

(This is something you should never do with emails that supposedly come from financial institutions. Always log in by typing their URL into the address box of your browser.)

Sure enough, up came a website that looked like PayPal, but Firefox showed that my login was being handled by a **Russian** domain! Strange behaviour indeed for an **American** company!

The above is just one example of what is called “phishing”. Phishing is the name given to attempts to steal Internet users financial information by having them login to a fake site and enter vital details, such as credit card number, name, and security number from the back of the credit card.

Once the criminal gangs who are behind much of this activity get those particulars, they raid the accounts and launder the money through people who have been employed to forward the money to them. The pretext they often use to con people into doing the laundering is that transfer of funds via a private individual overcomes bureaucratic obstacles to funds transfer in their own country.

Customers of National Australia, Commonwealth and Westpac have been reported recently as targets of phishing attempts.

I treat emails that seek verification of financial details with utter disdain. If my bank wants to verify something with me, they ring me or write to me by “snail mail”. I also treat as junk (spam) all emails offer employment handling payments on behalf of an overseas company. Legitimate companies have no difficulty arranging transfer of funds through the banking system. I suggest you do the same.

And let me repeat it yet again “***Never follow the links in emails purporting to come from financial institutions seeking verification of your confidential information.***” Such links will usually try to direct you to fake websites where your information may be captured by criminals. The fake site may also try to embed key-logging software on your computer so that they can track what you type in when visiting genuine websites.

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Rules for the mailing list

There was a question recently concerning what rules apply to the mailing list. The answer was that we don't actually have any formulated rules, relying instead on the Moderator's discretion. That gives great power to the Moderator and no guidance whatever to the subscribers.

We have therefore resolved to produce a set of guidelines for the guidance of both the Moderator and the subscribers. So far we have the following suggestions:

- No “bad” language and no abusive emails (i.e. no flaming)
- Off-topic discussions to be conducted off list (i.e. directly between those interested) or via a separate general list if one is implemented
- In this context “topic” means “concerning Hobart Computer Users Group Inc. aims, objectives and related matters”
- Posters to bear in mind that the list is read by members of other computer groups
- All posted messages to be addressed to hcug-mailing-list@hobartpcgroup.org.au to allow the Moderator/List Manager to filter them out of his/her incoming emails and deal with them appropriately. Messages not so addressed may not be sent on.
- Subscribers who disagree with the Moderator's decision in respect to a posting to have the right to appeal to the Management Committee.

Please forward your suggestions to the Moderator (moderator@hobartpcgroup.org.au).

For the benefit of those who wish to exchange “off-topic” emails, one suggestion is that a separate mailing list be created for just that purpose. If anyone is interested in such a list, we would first need a list manager, whose job it would be to maintain the subscribers' list on our webhost. After that we could invite people to subscribe, lay down the ground rules, and appoint a moderator (not necessarily the list manager).

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The Campbells are on the move

As many members of the Group and subscribers to this list know the Editor/Webmaster and his good lady are moving from their North Hobart home to a residence near New Norfolk. The move will commence on 4 January 2006 with the signing of the lease and be completed as soon thereafter as the sorting of 32 years of accumulated junk permits.

During the transition, if you have occasion to phone either of us, using either our “old” phone number or one of our mobile numbers, please leave a message so that we can get back to you.



New residence

Further details as they come to hand!

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Coffee, anyone?

A while back Peter Williams suggested a “Coffee-N-Chat” group. Unfortunately, he then became ill and was unable to pursue the formation of the group. Peter is much better now and still interested. He can be contacted directly, if you would like to join him for a cuppa and a discussion of the possibilities. Contact details are as follows:

Peter Williams
Home phone: (03) 6225 0071
Mobile phone: 0422 370 999
Email: pewtas@bigpond.net.au
Website: <http://nav.to/pew>

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Problems with Firefox 1.5?

On December 8, 2005, Scot's Newsletter published a story that wondered whether Firefox 1.5 had problems. (See: [Firefox 1.5: Not Ready For Prime Time?](#)) In response, some 500 users of Firefox 1.5 have sent in their experiences to the various publications that picked up Scot's comments. Scot says “A picture is emerging about Firefox 1.5 in the real world -- on a small percentage of Windows, Mac, and Linux computers -- that is less than positive.

“Before we get too far down that path, however, let's put things in perspective. More than 60 percent of the people who responded to our request for personal experiences with Firefox 1.5 reported they had no problems whatsoever with the browser software. And there is absolutely no statistically valid way to draw any hard conclusions about how many people are having stability issues with Firefox 1.5 based on this small sample size. At a rough guess, the number of people experiencing serious problems is probably well under 10 percent of all the people who have downloaded and installed Firefox 1.5.”

Reported “bugs”

Problems reported include the following:

- Firefox's use of physical and virtual memory is exceptionally high.
- CPU usage spikes to 100 percent (usually while loading a Web page).
- The browser freezes up for seconds, minutes, or permanently.
- The browser won't launch until they remove an errant "firefox.exe" process in Task Manager.
- The browser crashes suddenly (usually while loading a Web page).
- The browser has trouble loading specific pages, but there's no commonality among users as to which pages won't load.
- The initial launch of Firefox loads slower.
- Third-party application hyperlinks (such as a link in an e-mail message) take a long time to open a new Firefox tab or to launch the browser.

Mozilla's Response

InternetWeek spoke with Mozilla's Mike Schroepfer, Vice President, Engineering and Chris Beard, Vice President, Products. They report that both Mozilla executives were attentive and interested in their findings, but did not appear to be fazed by them. "We have more than 10 million downloads of Firefox 1.5, and the overwhelming feedback we've received from people downloading has been positive," said Schroepfer. "We have heard some reports [of high memory use], and we're working through them now in hopes of a successful resolution. It's our goal to make Firefox users happy."

The next release of Firefox, version 1.5.0.1, is expected in late January or early February. That release will concentrate on security and stability, but may not address the reported freezing and slow response.

Advice

I use a Linux distribution called Xandros. To update applications, Xandros users use a utility called Xandros Networks. Updates to installed programs are offered automatically as they become available and one just clicks on OK for them to be downloaded and installed, in a manner not too dissimilar to Windows updates. At this stage, Xandros has not updated Firefox to version 1.5 preferring to stay with version 1.0.7. I suggest that you do the same for now. When 1.5.0.1 gets here, or when Xandros moves to 1.5, it will be time to review the situation in the light of what early adopters report.

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Happy New Year

2006 is here! Happy New Year to all our readers! Although the Editor is moving out of town, it is his intention to keep this newsletter going. Your input will help. Suggest websites, send in hints, comment on issues raised. If you don't, then the newsletter may gradually fade away.

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Produced using StarOffice 8.0 from <http://www.sun.com> running under Xandros Linux 3.0
Editor: Peter Campbell, C/-Hobart Computer Users Group Inc., PO Box 3179, West Hobart Tas 7000, Australia.
Phone: 0414 402 092 **Email:** editor@hobartpcgroup.org.au

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